

# Schools substituting field trips with video links

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Call it a 21st century field trip.

Fifth-graders at Kingswood Elementary School peered into tide pools, listened to crashing waves and peppered a park ranger with questions – all without leaving their classroom in Citrus Heights.

Through a live videoconference last week, the students "visited" Crystal Cove State Park on the coast of Orange County. Ranger Jennifer Langer – surrounded by cameras on the rocky shore – taught a lesson on tide-pool ecology over the large screen at the front of Room 13.

She showed the students starfish, hermit crabs and octopuses. She quizzed their knowledge of vertebrates, invertebrates and bivalves. And thanks to another camera set up in the classroom, she fielded questions, such as this one from Domingo Perez:

"What would happen if a poisonous jellyfish stung a poisonous jellyfish?"

Probably nothing, Langer told him. Most jellyfish are immune to the poisons of their peers.

The videoconferencing technology allows schools to introduce students to places they might otherwise not see. Most of the Kingswood fifth-graders had never been to a real tide pool. Many had never been to the ocean.

Other classes at schools throughout California use the same technology to virtually visit state parks in San Mateo, San Diego and Tuolumne counties and learn about elephant seals, paleontology and the Gold Rush. The park rangers' lessons are directly tied to the science and social studies standards public schools are expected to teach.

The virtual field trips are offered by the state Parks and Recreation Department through a program called Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students, or PORTS, which started in 2005 and reached about 700 classrooms last year. Schools don't pay for the program, but must have the right technology to participate – a high-speed Internet connection and a screen and camera for videoconferencing.

"It's like a field trip but you're not actually there," 10-year-old Asal Ghaseni-Neri said after the tide-pool lesson. "You're looking at it."

The fact that students are increasingly "looking at it" – instead of touching it – when it comes to learning about the environment has some advocates worried, though.

"You have to get your hands dirty and your feet wet to have an experience in nature," said Richard Louv, whose book "Last Child in the Woods" espouses the need for children to spend more time outdoors. "You can't do that online."

Louv says kids have to engage all their senses – touching, smelling, tasting and hearing as well as seeing – to benefit from the experience.

Teachers and park rangers say, however, that most schools can't get their students out into the wild because of strained budgets, an emphasis on math and English test scores and urban sprawl. Virtual visits, they say, are better than no visits at all.

"Getting a bus to send 70 kids somewhere is often so much of a hassle with time constraints and finances," said Kingswood teacher Nichole Harshbarger. "Whereas in this situation, I just took the whole class to the ocean and we didn't have to get on a bus."

She said it would probably take at least two years of fundraising to come up with money for such a trip.

"We have a hard time getting our kids to pay for a \$10 Imax," she said.

The Sierra Club has sponsored a bill (AB 2989) that would provide money for outdoor education at schools and after-school programs that serve low-income children. Funding is unlikely this year given the state's budget crisis, acknowledged Martin LeBlanc, the Sierra Club's national youth education director.

But he's pushing for it nonetheless.

"It's a sad statement on the current education system that so many children in California have to experience nature and the outdoors not by touching the tree and smelling the air, but by having to look at it through a computer," LeBlanc said.

"I understand why teachers and schools are doing it. ... But we need to make sure those virtual experiences do not take over for real experiences, because they do not compare."

But the children in Harshbarger's class weren't complaining about their dry-feet, clean-hands "visit" to the tide pools.

"It was funner than a real field trip for me," said Pricila Ramirez, 11.

"You got to see more things. On a real field trip you don't get to see sea stars and hermit crabs. You just go to the park or the pool."

*Editor's note: This story changed from the version that appeared in print to correct the number of the bill being sponsored by the Sierra Club.*

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